

THE HONEY TREE

By Robert D. Culp

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It had been two weeks since we found the honey tree. We hadn't forgot it; we'd been awful busy, what with school and chores and taking the pups hunting and all. But we'd get to it. It was one of those sort of secret treasures stuck in the back of our minds, waiting its turn, now and again nudging Cotton and me with little reminders. Every time we'd see a bee picking its way across a full-spread, yellow dandelion, or pulling apart a pink clover blossom, we'd look at each other and grin.

"Today, Rooster? After school?"

"We'll need more time than that, Cotton. A whole day. No call to hurry." Cotton chewed on the clover stem he'd swiped from the bee. "We could do it today, Rooster." Pause. "If we ditch school."

I considered the proposition. "Naw, Cotton," I said, half hoping he'd talk me into it. "I owe Pa something for not calling me down about the last day we missed." We hadn't really truly played hooky then; that confounded hog came under the heading: honest excuse. But Pa had covered for us. Saved us a lot of ridiculment.

"Yeah, Rooster." Cotton nodded. "Know what you mean."

"Saturday, then. We'll Sneak off right after breakfast."

So it was set.

Saturday, old mister sun smiled down on a wet world. It had rained a good one Friday evening, and the thunderheads were already building again when Cotton and I started into the woods. We'd raided our house as we left. We had a milk pail, a long-handled wooden ladle, a pocketful of strike-anywhere matches, and Pa's hunting knife. Far as we could see, we were ee-quipped.

At the tangle of fox grapes that signed we were near there, we flopped down for a grape-break. The black-purple bunches were still dripping with raindrops. The whole place was oozing with bodacious perfume—a sight better than even that fancy stuff I gave Ma on her birthday. Set me back forty nine cents at the store in White Chimney, but couldn't come close to fox grapes for smelling good. In a quick wink Cotton and I were smeared eyebrows to ankles with the sticky juice.

Well, as Ma says, a body always pays for indulgence. This came close to costing us our honey. While we were lying there popping grapes, there came a stomping in the woods. Some lead-footed invader was headed straight up the ridge for our bee tree.

Cotton rolled out of the vines and snaked up the hill after him. He left me dragging the pail, trying to keep it quiet and stay with him through that brush. There was no way. Cotton had his usual edge. When I caught him, he was scrunched behind a stand of scrubby shadbush and cedar. I punched him, twice, in the ribs, for running off from me. But Cotton paid no never-mind. He just shushed me and pointed at our bee tree.

Garvey Bockenweiler stood looking up at the hole, some six feet above his head. About a zillion bees were humming in and out, acting important like bees do. Like Uncle Jake says, they were sticking close to home in case of rain.

Garvey had a bucket and an ax. No question about it. He was after our honey.

Nothing we could do. We were scared green by that old man. He hated everything in general, and kids in particular.

Cotton squirmed out from under me and rubbed his ailing rib cage. “Rooster, what’s old Garvey doing so far from his place? How come he’s messing around in your woods?”

Garvey lived two ridges over, on Big Little Creek. Downstream from Uncle Jake. He was a longish two miles from home.

“These woods aren’t rightly ours, Cotton, even if they back up to our place. Pa says they aren’t worth owning. Nobody seems to claim them.”

“Well, that’s sure our bee tree, Rooster. We found it. No three ways about that.”

“Nobody owns a bee tree, less it’s on their land. Garvey probably figures that’s his honey.”

For sure. Garvey took one more long, satisfied look at that buzzing hole, like a man admiring his new horse. Then he pulled a big sheet of skeeter netting out of his bucket. He yanked off his hat and spread that net over his head so it hung down and covered his face and neck. Last he tucked the ends into his shirt collar and jammed his hat plumb over his ears to hold everything in place.

I looked at Cotton. “Why didn’t you think of that?”

“We got our fixings at your place, Rooster. If your brain had been turned on, you’d have swiped some of your Ma’s milk straining cloth.”

About then we both figured out it didn’t much matter, seeing as we’d been dealt out of the honey business anyhow. So we fixed our sights back on Garvey.

The old man was ready. He hefted the ax a couple of times, set it down while he spit on each hand—for luck as much as anything, I reckon—then let loose with a ferocious swing.

I felt the fury swelling up in my gullet. “He’s gonna chop the whole tree down, Cotton!” I forgot to whisper, and I halfway stood up.

But Garvey was working; he never looked away from that tree. The ax made gollacious great thunks as it bit into the trunk. Chips were winging through the air with a fine whirring sound.

Cotton pulled me down out of sight. “That ornery critter is going to waste our bee tree for one measly bucket of honey:” He was as riled up as I was, but neither of us could do a thing.

“Sort of like killing the goose to get the eggs,” I said, but Cotton wasn’t in the mood for folk tales. He shut me up with a fierce face.

It wasn’t any trifling matter. The tree was a giant white oak, at least two hundred years old. It would have taken Cotton and me together to reach around the trunk. Sometime back, a hundred years ago, some calamity had busted its top-center branch clean off. The stub had hollowed out back into the trunk. Those bees calculated that hole was just made for their hive.

Now Garvey figured to take the honey by felling the tree. He probably gave nary a thought to the white oak. It’s only us kids that notice every tree, and rock, and bush, and berry—and every everything. Grownups learn to look right past the best things. Except for some, like Uncle Jake or Pa.

“What a waste,” moaned Cotton. “Ifn he’d leave that bee tree, we’d have honey forever.”

The old man was well into the tree now. We could see why the ax had boomed so loud-like. The trunk was hollow clear to the bottom. Garvey opened a fair-to-middling hole, and a few bees trickled out to inspect their new back door. He stepped away to let them settle down again.

Now that the ax had quit whumping, I heard another noise—a whuffling and pushing sound.

“Hear that?” I jabbed Cotton. “The pigs!”

“Ho, boy. Look for a climbing tree.”

Those acorn-loving pigs spent a lot of time in these woods. We’d been keeping our eyeballs peeled for them. Especially for the big hog. Old Lop Ear was sort of a hog-image of Garvey: that pig hated everything and everybody.

“Maybe Old Lop Ear isn’t with ’em.” I swivelled around scouting for an escape route, just in case.

“You wish.”

And Cotton was right. Across the clearing, the first pig I saw had mean red eyes in a huge head, and a crumpled left ear hanging down. I turned to skeedaddle.

“Hold on, Rooster. He’s not looking at us.”

That hog was glaring at Garvey. The old man had his back to the pigs. He was leaning on his ax watching the bees explore the new hole.

Now it’s plumb stupid to turn your back on Old Lop Ear. But then, Garvey hadn’t heard the pigs, so he had part of an excuse. Try explaining that to Old Lop Ear. He charged Garvey like a freight train.

Two jumps from his target, that hog couldn’t contain his tarnal enthusiasm any longer. He cut loose with a snort that sounded like a bull bellowing. Garvey took one look—blood stopped, eyeballs popped, and legs froze. Then he moved. Faster than a cat with its tail under the rocker. Garvey put one foot in that hole he’d chopped, and leaped straight up. He grabbed a limb about ten—twelve feet off the ground and hung there like a possum.

Down below, Old Lop Ear plowed up the ground to show how he felt. Then he raised up on his hind legs like some old hound, and nipped at Garvey. Every time the hog jumped up, Garvey’d lift his feet, and all that hog could reach was the seat of his britches. After a spell, Garvey’s bottom was kinda ragged.

Old Garvey was doing all right; he had pretty strong arms for such an old coot. I was surprised to find myself admiring his gumption. He might be hanging there yet if the bees hadn’t sided against him. His head was level with their main entrance. It was hard for the bees not to notice him.

Garvey managed to ignore a couple of stings on his hands. Then I saw that his skeeter netting had attracted quite a swarm. I guess they found their way inside. Garvey commenced wiggling and shaking his head. Finally he loosed one hand and ripped his head covering off.

The bees took that as a signal. In about a second and a half, Garvey had eleven thousand honeybees fighting for position on his head. He let go with the other hand and started wiping gobs of bees off with both hands.

For the life of me I couldn’t see how he expected to stay up. Maybe those bees would hold him up. I didn’t have to think about it long. As it turned out, nothing held him up. Garvey landed on Old Lop Ear right in front of his crockedy tail.

Old Lop Ear spun around like an unbroke horse. Garvey did himself proud. He stayed on for three spins and then jumped clear.

Garvey circled round and round that bee tree with Old Lop Ear eating his heels. They were both dizzy by the time he broke off and went weaving down the hill. The last I saw, the old man was dodging from tree to rock to tree, with that hog smashing everything flat in between.

After things quieted down, Cotton and I checked out the wreckage. Garvey’d left his ax, his bucket, his hat and net, and a big hole in the side of the tree, about chest-

high to us.

We stuffed leaves in that hole and lit 'em and soon the tree was filled with smoke. I borrowed Garvey's net and covered up. Then I climbed to the top hole and stretched way down inside with Pa's hunting knife to cut out some comb. I used Ma's wooden ladle to fish it up. It didn't take long to fill the milk pail with comb and honey. The bees didn't bother us, but the smoke pert nigh choked me to death.

The folks were happy enough to see that honey; nothing was said about our sneaking off to get it. Ma checked us over for stings. She couldn't believe we'd got away scot-free.

Pa collected Garvey's things, and the next week dropped them off at the store in White Chimney for the old man to pick up. He even put some honey in the bucket for him. Pa told us, even if Garvey had up and left them, it wasn't right to make off with someone else's stuff.

Cotton and I agreed. We wouldn't like anybody taking our honey.